

The Witness of the Tibhirine Martyrs¹

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God is love (I John 4, 8). God is communion. Salvation is sharing in the intimate life of communion between the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit. Christ is the faithful witness (*o mártus o pistós*; Apoc. 1, 5), the martyr par excellence, the primordial sacrament of salvation, because he is the visible manifestation on earth of the Father's salvific design for the whole human race. The Church in its turn is the sacrament of Christ, because it also is the visible manifestation of this same reality among men and women of the same faith, the same hope and the same love.

The death of Christ was not an isolated act. It was the culminating point of his whole life. So is it also in the life and death of his disciples. They are called to witness with their whole lives. Those called "martyrs" are those who have accepted a violent death rather than be unfaithful to the witness they have given throughout their lives. A Christian is a martyr, therefore, first of all, by his life, his life lived to the end.

The African Church at the time of Tertullian and Cyprian possessed a great crown of martyrs. Again, in the course of recent years, in North Africa many witnesses of Christ have undergone a violent death as the logical sequence of their life of communion in the name of the Gospel. Many of them have left no trace in the press, and remain known to God alone. The deaths of some of them are better known and have attracted attention. Of all those who have witnessed unto death in Algeria in the course of the last seven years, the seven monks of Tibhirine have probably attracted the most attention and received the greatest show of affection and interest. But prior to them, eleven other ministers of the Gospel in the diocese of Algiers died violent deaths in the exercise of their ministry of communion. After them there was another great witness of the faith, the bishop of Oran, Pierre Claverie.

My words here bear essentially on the witness of the seven monks of Tibhirine, my brothers in the Cistercian Order, whom I had the grace of knowing personally. Nonetheless I wish to say something about the other martyrs of the Church of Algiers of the same period, and describe the context in which all these witnesses were led to shed their blood.

THE CHRISTIAN WITNESSES OF ALGERIA

On May 8, 1994, Sister Paule-Hélène Saint-Raymond and Brother Henry Vergès were assassinated in the library they ran for the young people of a crowded section of Algiers. On October 2 of the same year, Sister Esther Paniagua and Sister

Caridad María Alvarez were struck down in front of the chapel in Bab-el-Oued. On December 27, still in 1994, four White Fathers were assassinated in their house at Tizi-Ouzou: Fathers Alain Dieulangard, Charles Deckers, John Chevillard, and Christian Chessel. On September 1995, Sister Denise Leclercq and Sister Jeanne Littlejohn were assassinated at Belcourt with two bullets in the head. Finally, on November 10, 1995 Sister Odette Prévost was killed and Sister Chantal Galicher was wounded as they were leaving their house in the Kouba district.

A certain constant element can be noted in these deaths. All these persons had established friendly relations with the Algerian people, and lived in close connection with the common people, whose life they shared. All were killed in the milieu where they lived and worked. The clear message given by the assassins—or by those who directed them—was that this proximity and this brotherliness were precisely the disturbing elements they wished to get rid of. They were not reproached for proselytizing, and they were not doing so. They were reproached for being persons-of-communion, and for condemning by their very lives all forms of exclusion and every form of violence, from whatever side it came, and in the name of any ideal, religious or political, by which this violence was exercised.

None of them were into politics. None of them had taken sides in the quarrels dividing the various factions of Algerian society. Yet their lives did have a political dimension: they were working to construct the Algerian community. By their nationality and their religion they belonged to a small minority group. Their presence in Algeria affirmed the right to be different, in opposition to all forms of exclusion and the eradication of the Other.

None of them were solitary workers, operating alone and in a marginal way. They were all persons living in small Christian communities, faithful sons and daughters of the great Christian community, the Church, and lovers of the great human community, without any exclusivism. All incarnated the type of Christian presence in the land of Algiers that had been established by the great Bishop of Algiers, Cardinal Duval.

This latter had been nominated as the head of the Archdiocese of Algiers toward the end of the colonial period; nothing seemed to have prepared him for such a complex situation, and yet he showed himself as the man of the hour. During the course of the war of independence, he gained the respect of all—except the extremists on both sides—by affirming his faith in the possibility of everyone living as brothers and sisters, and by explicitly and repeatedly condemning violence, all sorts of violence, from whichever side it came. It was a very dangerous position to take, and it is a miracle that he was never eliminated.² God willed that he remain faithful to this type of Christian witness, even to advanced old age and long after laying down his official functions. Those who died as martyrs in the course of the last years are those who best lived the witness that he himself had lived all through his episcopate. He lived this witness up until his death—for it was

truly the deep pain caused by the apparent crumbling of cohabitation and the form of universal brotherhood he desired for Algeria that was the immediate cause of his death.

All the religious men and women whose martyrdom I have mentioned died before the seven Tibhirine monks did. Another great witness of the faith, a disciple and faithful friend of Cardinal Duval, died shortly after them, closing, in a way, this hellish cycle. I mean Pierre Claverie, Archbishop of Oran, assassinated on August 1, 1996. A very fine, recent book, written by a confrere and friend of Claverie, Father Jean-Jacques Pérennès, brings him alive for us.³ Without dwelling on the circumstances of his death, the author wisely concentrates on describing his witness—his martyrdom in the profound sense of the word—all his life as a man, a religious, and a bishop.

Pierre Claverie was born in Algiers, in the Bab el-Oued district in 1938, and he spent his childhood and adolescence there. After several years of study and formation in Europe as a Dominican, he returned to Algeria where he lived until his death. He became Bishop of Oran in 1981 after having been for several years the director of the Glycines, a cultural center for Algerians run by the Catholic Church in Algiers. One chapter of Pérennès' book is entitled "Towards the Joyful Encounter with the Other." The gradual discovery of the Other is indeed an important dimension of Claverie's journey. Not merely a simple discovery, but the acceptance of the Other in all his *difference*.

Beginning with the political reversal of 1988 and especially after the tragic events of 1992 (the interruption of the electoral process by the Army), Claverie constantly affirmed the necessity of "living together while respecting differences." With his Algerian friends who shared the same vision, he continued analyzing the successive situations and applying this principle to them. Certain persons accused him of playing politics, but in reality he was making a serious analysis of the political situation in order to give it a Christian response. His understanding of the situation led him constantly to denounce in the name of the Gospel all the injustices and all the acts of violence. On August 15, 1993, he published a communiqué in the Algerian press, entitled "We cannot keep silent, " from which I cite these extracts:

Along with the Catholics of my diocese, I state the consternation and horror which seizes us in the face of the escalating violence in this country which we love. . . . We pray God to enlighten with His wisdom those who hold political power today and those who attack it violently, so that dialogue and peace may permit the resolution, in justice, of the problems besetting the Algerian people, and specially those who are more harshly affected by the economic crisis. We humbly appeal to the reason and faith of all believers so that dialogue may be substituted for murder and repression."⁴

It was precisely this evangelical response to the violent situation that earned him his death. But he did not die alone. The same murderous bomb that blew him to pieces also carried away in death a Moslem, his chauffeur and friend Mohammed, mingling their blood on the ground and on the wall of the episcopal residence. This highly symbolic union in death has often been remarked on. This circumstance reminds us that the death of Christian witnesses cannot be separated from that of all the other victims of the same spiral of violence that has engulfed Algeria for close to ten years. Even if no official figures exist, we can evaluate at about 200,000 the number of victims, most of them anonymous. Whatever their religious or political affiliations may have been, these persons (at least a good number of them) have been eliminated for having also incarnated in their lives the same values which Christians incarnate by their fidelity to Christ, namely, respect for the differences in others, a basic acceptance and love of the other, as Other.

THE MONASTERY AT TIBHIRINE

Now I would like to concentrate on describing the Christian witness (the *marturion*) of the seven Tibhirine monks assassinated on or around May 21, 1996. They are not seven individual witnesses, although each of them had well-defined personalities—they are one community witness. It is important therefore to grasp the roots of this community in Algerian society, and for that we must go back a little in history.

A Cistercian community had existed several decades previously at Staouëli, 17 kilometers west of Algiers. Founded in 1843 by the Abbey of Aiguebelle, thirteen years after the conquest of Algeria by the French, it acquired a certain notoriety by its rapid development. This foundation, however, was connected with the colonial system in its spirit and its mode of implantation. It was closed in 1904. A new community, with a very different style and spirit, was founded near Médéa some thirty years later.

Like many monasteries born in the nineteenth century or at the beginning of the twentieth, the community of Our Lady of Atlas began as a refuge. A group of monks of the monastery of Our Lady of Deliverance in Slovenia, fearing expulsion, opened a refuge at Ouled-Trift in 1934, which was transferred to Ben Chicao in 1935 and to Tibhirine, 7 kilometers from Médéa, in 1938. The refuge was then assumed by the French Abbey of Aiguebelle and transformed into a genuine foundation, which soon became an autonomous monastic community. From the beginning, this community established relations of friendship and collaboration with the local population, which in a way adopted it. These relations with the local population permitted the community, although composed entirely of Frenchmen, to pass through the Algerian war without great difficulties. One of the monks, Brother Luke, was indeed taken as hostage but was freed after a few days.



The Monastery at Tibhirine, 1948. Archives of the Monastery of Aiguebelle, France.

At the end of the Algerian war, however, the situation changed radically. The Algerian Church, composed in great part of Frenchmen or “pieds-noirs” (Frenchmen born in Algeria), was reduced to a tiny remnant by the massive exodus of these two groups to France. Conversions to Christianity had become almost impossible, at least openly recognized conversions. Given the impossibility of finding recruits in their area, the question arose as to whether it was really opportune to maintain in Algeria a monastic community greatly reduced in numbers. The authorities of the Cistercian Order therefore decided to close the monastery. But Cardinal Duval, who had long since recognized in the Tibhirine community a realization of his ideal of Christian presence, roared like a lion, and the monastery was not closed. The mere presence of a Christian monastic community, whatever the nationality of its members, in the midst of a Moslem people, seemed to him to be of capital importance. The community was therefore maintained, and its witness found its blossoming in the death of seven of its members in 1996. This death was unanimously bewailed by the local population, which was entirely Moslem.

A SPIRITUALITY OF COMMUNION

Let us look a little at the nature of the witness of these monks. At many levels it was a witness of communion—the Christian reality par excellence, since “God is communion” as Saint John tells us. There were four primary expressions of this

communion: with God in contemplative prayer, between the brothers within the community, between the community and its neighbors, and communion of believers with other believers.

The monk comes to the monastery to serve God there, by living as deeply as possible, within the cloister, the personal union with God to which every human being is called. Son in the First-Born Son, vibrating with the love that has been poured out in his heart by the Holy Spirit, the monk strives to meet the Father in a prayer that aims at being as continual as possible, and expresses itself visibly in the celebration of the liturgy. His whole life tends to the mystical union that consists of letting oneself be transformed day by day to the image of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit.

How each of the seven brothers lived this mystical union in the depth of his heart is God's secret. One of them, however, gifted in soul with the talent of a poet and mystic, allows us to glimpse through his writings this interior dialogue. I mean Christopher. His poems, but especially his *Journal* of the last years, show us how the events of each day during these three years rich in drama all around them, were transformed into prayer and outpourings of fiery love.⁵

This journal is one long love-poem, incarnated in a very concrete situation, and it is important to cite at least some passages:

Oh, if dying could halt and prevent the death of still so many others, oh, willingly, and as they say, with pleasure: yes, I volunteer. (Dec. 20, 1994)

On this day I ask you for the grace of becoming a servant
and of giving my life here
as a ransom for peace
as a ransom for life.
Jesus draw me
in your joy
of crucified love. (July 25, 1995)

This mystical union with God was not lived by these brothers as so many isolated individuals but as a community; rather, their witness was communitarian. There was a community that comprised, besides the seven brothers put to death, two others who escaped the kidnapping and execution, as well as those living in an annex house of Tibhirine in Morocco. It was an authentic community, not merely a gathering of friends united by affinities between them or because they shared the same ideas and projects. No, a Christian community is a group of persons normally quite different from each other in all points of view, whom God has gathered to make a sacrament of his presence. Each member of this community had a personal past and a vocational journey quite his own; each had a well-defined personality, as different from each other as can be imagined. And yet they had achieved, especially in the last three years, not only a very great communion among

them, but also a perfect unanimity in decisions affecting their lives, a unanimity that could only be rooted in the deep life of prayer of each of them.

Bruno was the son of a military man, and had done his military service in Algeria. Célestin was a social worker and Paul had been a plumber and former vice-prefect in Upper Savoy. Each brought to the community great richness in self-giving and a communitarian spirit.

Bonds of friendship of remarkable depth were created between these simple monks and the population around them, and these bonds remain just as lively four years after their death. These bonds of friendship with an Algerian and Moslem population constitute one of the most exquisite expressions of their Christian witness.

The person who contributed the most in creating these bonds was no doubt Brother Luke, a person whose life deserves to be written. Born in 1914, even as an infant he knew the terrible violence of the First World War and the sufferings of the post-war period. As a young doctor, he knew the violence of the Second World War, in the course of which he volunteered to care for the prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps. He entered Aiguebelle in December 1941 and went to Algeria in 1946. Immediately, he opened within the monastery enclosure a dispensary. From that time until his death in 1996—for half a century—he cared for whoever came there without regard to nationality, political affiliation, or religion. Everyone loved and respected him, because everyone knew that they were loved and respected by him. At the beginning, his dispensary supplied for the absence of public health services. If people continued to come to him after the installation of public dispensaries and hospitals in the region, it was because they found in him not only a *toubib* (medic) whose diagnosis was almost always correct, but also a person of God, both human and supernatural, incarnating in his mode of being the pastoral solicitude of the Son of God. A person of great interior freedom and gifted with a disarming sense of humor, he feared nothing and no one. No threat from any quarter could prevent him from witnessing to the end, even at the risk of his life, a universal love for whoever needed medical care.

Christopher, whose mystical dimensions I have already mentioned, was also, as a poet, a person of great sensitivity. As he was in charge of the workers, and had contacts with the family of the watchman in particular, he had friendly relations with all of them. His *Journal* for the last three years contains passages of great freshness.

At the moment of the consummation of the community's witness, Christian was the superior of the group, called the "prior" in monastic terms. His vocation followed a special trajectory. Born into a military family, he spent his childhood in Algeria, where his mother had formed him to have a deep respect for the Algerians. Later, he returned to Algeria during the war, as a young officer. At first, he was a secular priest of the diocese of Paris, but feeling the call to the contemplative life he

chose the monastery of Our Lady of Atlas at Tibhirine. With permission from his superiors, he studied the Arabic language and culture in Rome. Having developed a deep knowledge and great love for the religion of Islam, he involved himself and deeply involved his community in inter-religious dialogue. When he was elected prior of his community in 1984, he guided it into a more explicit orientation towards this inter-religious dialogue, which crowned the other forms of communion already practiced. Already for a good many years a group called the Ribât el Salam had been meeting regularly at the monastery. There they prayed and shared religious experience.

THE LAST DAYS OF THE MONKS OF TIBHIRINE

In 1993, when the electoral process was halted and the country plunged into a spiral of violence from which it has not yet succeeded in freeing itself, foreigners were called upon by the Islamist groups to leave the country under pain of death. Like many others, the Tibhirine monks had to ask themselves: Must we remain or must we depart? They chose to remain. On December 14 of that year, when twelve Croatian Christians working at Tamesguida (four kilometers from the monastery) had their throats cut, the problem was posed in a more immediate way; and it was made even more immediate following a visit by an armed commando to the monastery on Christmas night. After a long discernment in prayer, the monks opted to remain in Algeria. In the following years, each time that missionaries, almost all of them intimate friends of the community, were assassinated, the question was raised again more sharply. Each time, the monks chose to remain, after a serious discernment in prayer.

Why would they do this? In Europe, some people were saying they understood that missionaries should remain to continue their apostolate, but not the monks, who, at any rate, could lead their life of prayer anywhere. That was to misunderstand their life completely. The contemplative life is not lived in the abstract. It is always incarnated, rooted in a concrete place and cultural context. The Tibhirine monks in no way wanted to be martyrs; they were not visionaries. If they opted to remain, it was for them a duty of fidelity, and that was true on many levels.

The Cistercian monk takes a vow of stability, which implies not only stability in the monastic vocation, but also in a concrete community and in a determinate place, except in the case of a special mission. Of course, an entire community can displace itself, but it cannot do so without taking into account the bonds established with the local society and culture. The community of Tibhirine understood itself only with its roots in the Atlas mountains and with its bonds of friendship with the whole population of Tibhirine, Draa Esnar, and Médéa. When preaching a retreat at Algiers some weeks before the kidnapping, Christian said with a dangerous play on words, “I flaunt this difference. I come from the mountain . . .”

The brothers understood that the local population was itself caught in a vise between two opposing violent forces (that of the government and of the rebels), and that it had no choice of fleeing. For the monks to flee, therefore, would have shown a lack of solidarity with those whom they had shared life with in the time of peace. After the martyrdom of Henry and Paule-Hélène, Christopher had written in his journal, “One cannot forget and depart without betraying something which remains a grace of proximity, friendship and truth” (May 29, 1995). The monks considered their presence as an affirmation of the right to be different (in a fundamentalistic context that wanted everyone to be alike), a right they claimed for the people around them as well as for themselves. Mohammed, the monastery watchman, had said to Christopher, “You, you still have a little door by which to depart. For us there is no road, no door.” And Moussa, one of the co-workers, had said to Christian, “If you depart, you deprive us of your hope, and you take away from us our hope too.” It would not have been Christian for them to depart, and so they stayed. They too, like Pierre Claverie, but in the way of contemplative monks, different from the ways of a bishop, carefully analyzed the political situation of the country—not to respond like politicians, but, rather, to give an evangelical response to the situation, and to give it with their lives. Christopher wrote in his journal: “The violence is killing me and I ought to find somewhere some support not to let myself be carried away by this flood of death” (July 11, 1995).

Does it suffice to say that the monk, especially if he is a foreigner, should not choose between two opposing forces? Here is Christopher’s reply: “Perhaps it is not enough to say that we have not to choose between the [political] power and the terrorists. In fact, every day and in concrete ways we choose those whom Jean-Pierre calls “the common people.” We cannot remain if we cut ourselves off from them. That makes us depend—in part—on their choice in our regard. We could become bothersome tomorrow or later.” They did indeed become bothersome.

In a talk given to some laymen in Algiers on a day of recollection, March 8, 1996, Christian commented vigorously on the Scriptural precept “Thou shalt not kill.” He applied it to all the situations in the country, ending with a series of lapidary phrases: “Not to kill time . . . Not to kill confidence . . . Not to kill death . . . Not to kill the country . . . Not to kill the Moslem . . . Not to kill the Church.” Two weeks later, he and his brothers were kidnapped, and two months later they were victims of this violence.

When on the night of March 26–27, 1996, a group of armed men came to the monastery and led the monks off in the direction of Médéa, to those who may have seen them passing through the village, they would have seemed to be following some terrorists—in fact, they were following Christ.

None of them desired martyrdom. They loved life and feared death. But they had consciously and explicitly accepted death if that was what God willed. In a

circular letter of November 21, 1995, they had written, “The brutal death of one of us, or of all of us at once, would only be a consequence of this choice of life following Christ.”⁶

If they had to die, they wanted to do it right! The old Brother Luke, who had long requested that at his funeral Edith Piaf’s “No, I regret nothing” should be sung, made this prayer at the prayer-of-the-faithful at Mass on December 31, 1994 just a few days after the dramatic visit on Christmas night: “Lord, grant us the grace to die without hatred in our hearts.” The inspiration of this beautiful prayer had been taken up in Christian’s Testament, a well-known document that will doubtless remain one of the finest pages of Christian literature in the twentieth century. This text expresses not only Christian’s sentiments but also those of all his brothers. In fact, beginning with a first version drawn up December 1, 1993, it was finished January 1, 1994. Between these two dates, Christian worked it over and refined it with the participation of the whole community. The document thus expresses not only his personal sentiments, but also those of all his brothers.

The last paragraph of Christian’s Testament is well known; it is here that Christian gives the title of friend to the man cutting his throat: “And you also, the friend of my last minute, who will not know what you are doing. Yes, for you also I wish this THANK YOU, this ‘A-Dieu’, for in God’s face I see yours. And let it be given to us to find ourselves there, two happy thieves in paradise, if it pleases God, the Father of both of us.”

There is, however, another paragraph in the middle of the text of even greater mystical significance. Alluding to those who found him naive in his esteem of Islam and in his will to dialogue with the Moslems, he added,

Those people should know that my most avid curiosity will be satisfied. I shall be able, if it pleases God, to immerse my gaze in that of the Father and contemplate with Him His children of Islam as He sees them, all illumined with the glory of Christ, fruits of His passion, invested with the gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and to restore likeness, playing with the differences.

In a sublime summary, Christian draws together the Biblical and patristic theology of the re-establishment of the divine resemblance, and the preoccupation he shared with Claverie and drew from the message of Jesus: that of respect for differences. Moreover, shortly before his death he said that one of the motives for remaining where he was, as a Christian and a European, was to affirm the right of the local common people to their own differences.

The communion of the Tibhirine monks with the Algerian people continues beyond their death. The seven long caskets carried by the cadets of the Algerian army, apparently with effort, into the Church of Our Lady of Africa on the day of the funeral, contained in reality only one head each. The monks’ bodies, which

have not been found, remain anonymously buried in the Algerian soil, in an unknown place—at least officially—with thousands of other victims, just as anonymous, of the same violence against which their lives had been an evangelical protest.

CONCLUSION

The pardon given in advance by Christian and all his brothers to those who might put them to death, as well as that given by the Cistercian Order and the Algerian Church at the time of the funeral, should not be conceived as a tacit and tranquil acceptance of the violence of which these witnesses were victims. Personally, out of fidelity to the witness of Christian, Luc, Bruno, Michael, Célestin, Paul, and Christopher, I agree to pardon those who killed them and those who cut off their heads—but even without the mystical ardor of Christian, I would very much like to know on what tormented faces I should recognize the image of God.

With Christian's admirable text, we can close our presentation of the Algerian martyrs. The last moment of their witness was situated in an extremely painful and confused period of Algerian history. In the present circumstances, it is probably impossible to have a process of canonization in good and due form, which, according to the norms in vigor at the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, would suppose a deep and minute knowledge of the circumstances of their death and the motives of their aggressors. Indeed, there has been no judicial inquiry permitting us to determine the facts, nor the identity of the assassins and their superiors with certitude, nor can we affirm with certitude in what measure the assassins' motives were religious. All that remains secondary, however, for the monks had been witnesses (martyrs) by their lives before becoming so by their deaths, and their deaths were certainly a consequence of how they lived. Their deaths were provoked by an evangelical attitude in situations of violence, lucidly perceived and analyzed in the light of faith. If a purely political reading of their life and death would be an obvious error, a purely spiritual reading that ignored the courage and lucidity of their involvement in concrete situations would be not only naive, but would also empty their message of its meaning. Was it not the same with the death of Christ?

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FEAST OF THE MARTYRS OF KOREA

NOTES

1. This essay, in a slightly different form, was presented at the Symposium on the Martyrs of Africa and Asia, Regina Apostolorum University, Rome, December 5, 2000.
2. On Cardinal Duval, see Marco Impagliazzo, *Duval d'Algeria. Una Chiesa tra Europa e mondo arabo 1948–1988*. (Rome: Edizioni Studium, 1994).

3. Jean-Jacques Pérennès, *Pierre Claverie. Un Algérien par alliance*. (Paris: Cerf, 2000).
4. Claverie, *Le Lien*, reprinted in *Lettres et messages* (August-September 1993):125–26.
5. *Aime jusqu'au bout du feu. Cent poèmes de vérité et de vie*. Selected and with commentary by Frère Didier, monk of the Abbey Notre-Dame de Tamié (Annecy: éditions Monte-Cristo, 1997). *Le souffle du don*. Journal of Brother Christopher monk of Tibhirine (Paris: Bayard–Centurion, 1999).
6. *Sept Vies pour Dieu et l'Algérie*, reprint. Selected and with commentary by Bruno Chenu, (Paris: Bayard/ Centurion, 1996), 180.